

## CHARLES FRENCH

In the early fifties a small boy might have been seen chasing butterflies and gathering wildflowers on the moors and hills of Cheltenham, where he and his family lived. This was Charles French, one of the founders of the 'Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria. Eighty years afterwards, now a man of ninety-three, Charles French died, and was buried on the hill where he had played and collected as a boy.

Charles French was born in Lewisham, Kent, on 10th September, 1840. His father died when the boy was quite young, and his mother again married, the step-father being Mr. Weatherall. The family came to Australia and settled at Cheltenham in 1852. There was little settlement in those days, and the road to the farm was known as Weatherall's Road. The name remains to-day as Weatherall Road.

Charles French was born with the naturalist's instinct, for he collected butterflies in England as a boy. At Cheltenham he received much discouragement in his bent, for farm work and land clearing were to be considered long before natural history. When quite a young lad he was sent on several trips to the goldfields, assisting in the loading of bullock drays going to Bendigo.

However, in 1858, his bent asserting itself, he was apprenticed to a nurseryman at Hawthorn, James Scott. Scott's nursery was in Burwood Road, most of the original site being now occupied by the Hawthorn railway station. Scott's brick house is still standing, next to the station. From this nursery Charles French wheeled a large number of elm trees in a wheelbarrow, along Burwood Road, Bridge Road, and Wellington Parade to the Fitzroy Gardens, where Mr. Bickford was Curator. These are the famous elms which now give so much shade in those lovely gardens. Again, he wheeled many trees to the Burnley Horticultural Gardens, and he himself planted from a small pot what is now one of the finest specimens of the Californian Redwood, *Sequoia gigantea*, in the State.

It was here that he first saw Baron von Mueller, then Dr. Mueller, who was riding his white pony, setting out on one of his long botanical journeys into the mountains. Mr. French retains with pride the testimonial given to the young man by James Scott, after he had served his apprenticeship. From Scott's nursery he went to Alex. Bogie's nursery in South Yarra, and then to that of Joseph Harris, which was situated on the east side of what is now the South Yarra railway station. Here he again met Dr. Mueller, and formed a life friendship with the botanist.

In 1864 French was appointed by Dr. Mueller to take charge of propagating work and the management of the glass-houses at the Melbourne Botanic Gardens, taking up his residence in the gardens house in Anderson Street.

At the Gardens he had full scope for his natural history inclina-

tion, for he often told me that he was afraid that he spent a lot of his time netting butterflies. His after life shows that the time was not wasted. In 1881 he was advanced to the more important position of custodian of the Botanical Museum, under Baron von Mueller.

Even in the early days, as now, the question of timber-boring insects was a vital one, and Charles French was requested to contribute an article to the Annual Report of the Department of



Charles French, Senior

Agriculture in 1874. This he did, the article being well-illustrated with wood cuts of many native beetles. This is probably the first entomological article published in Victoria.

In 1889 the Government decided to appoint an entomologist, to deal with and advise about insect pests, and French was appointed. He soon got to work, and in 1891 published Volume I of his *Destructive Insects of Victoria*. Eight thousand copies were issued, and this volume is now out of print. Four additional volumes were issued, the last appearing in 1911. This is a monu-

mental work, and the coloured plates, of which there are several dozen, were all executed under his supervision. He wrote a sixth volume, also with coloured plates, dealing with beneficial insects. This volume was never published, and now I suggest that the Club consider the question of having this volume published, to complete his life work.

At French's suggestion an interstate conference to discuss a uniform Vegetation Diseases Act was held in Melbourne, resulting in much permanent good. He laid the foundation of scientific fruit tree and other plant spraying in Victoria. In 1902 he initiated the first fumigation of citrus trees for red scale with hydrocyanic gas, a treatment now in common practice. In 1907 he attended an International Conference of Entomologists in London; and in 1908 he retired, full of honours, a great public servant, being succeeded by his son, Charles French the second.

I first met Charles French in 1891, when he gave me a copy of his first volume. I collected for him when living in the Mallee and in East Gippsland. In 1902 I joined his staff as a field officer, and enjoyed his friendship as chief for six years, when he retired. He was a splendid chief, always helpful and full of friendly advice. He was a welcome visitor among the orchardists, and as an economic entomologist, he was outstanding.

He was a Fellow of the Royal Society of England, Fellow of the Linnean Society of London, and Fellow of the Society of Isis, Dresden.

As like is attracted to like, Charles French soon found kindred spirits in the natural history world. Thus there gathered together with him a number of young men, notably Dudley Best, J. E. Dixon, David Kerstjaw, and Francis Barnard. These friends met frequently at the home in the Botanic Gardens from the sixties to the eighties, discussing their hobbies, and setting forth on their rambles together. Their rambles included long walks into the scrub at Brighton, the bush at Sandringham, and the tree country at Kew.

One day a Club was suggested; the matter was frequently discussed, and at last it was decided to advertise a meeting, inviting nature lovers to meet for the purpose of forming the Club. While the "conspirators" were proceeding to the meeting they were afraid that there would be no one there, and when they arrived at the appointed place, they were afraid of the whole project for a large number was attracted by the suggestion. Thus on the 17th May, 1880, at a meeting in the Athenaeum, in Collins Street, the Club—our Club—was inaugurated, and with Professor McCoy as President, Dudley Best as Secretary, Charles French being a member of Committee.

In his Botanic Gardens days, French was an enthusiastic and successful cultivator of native ferns and orchids. He was thus well qualified to write on these subjects. The first paper read at

the Club meetings was one by French on Victorian ferns. This is published in the *Southern Science Record* from 1880 to 1882. This was followed by *The Lycopodiaceæ of Victoria*, also published in the *Southern Science Record* of 1882.

His papers on Victorian Orchids were read from 1884 to 1887, the first appearing in Volume I, No. 1, of the *Victorian Naturalist*. He wrote and published many articles in the *Naturalist* on botany and entomology; he issued many Departmental Bulletins when Government Entomologist; and thus he undoubtedly laid the foundations of entomology in this State.

The interest of the Club was always in the heart of our friend, and on every occasion that we met, he would ask, "And how is the Club getting on?" It should be noted that it was always "the" Club—it was the only Club so far as he was concerned. It was an unfailling pleasure to him to note for fifty-three years the progress of the Club, the jubilee of which he was permitted to see. His last illness was only of a few hours' duration, and on 21st May last, full of honour and respect, he passed quietly away from us.

R. E. PESCOFF, F.L.S.

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